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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0286  
INFO RUEHXS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS  
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 0559  
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SUBJECT: SAPRANG SOFTENS HIS TONE

REF: A) BANGKOK 5949 B) CHIANG MAI 159

1. (SBU) Outspoken Third Army Commander LTG Saprang Kalayamitra has continued to consolidate control in the northern region, winning marks for showing restraint in his dealings with a police investigation and for a softer tone in his meetings with local officials.

2. (SBU) According to a local journalist, the 3rd army has pinpointed those responsible for arson attacks Wednesday on five schools in Kamphaengphet (ref a), but is leaving the case for police and district authorities under the Ministry of Interior to investigate and handle through legal channels. Reports suggest that the attacks were designed to discredit Saprang, hoping he would overreact and damage his chances for promotion. According to this theory, the Sept. 28 announcement of the military reshuffle list, including the expected appointment of Saprang as Assistant Army Chief, reduces the risk of any further such challenges.

3. (U) Saprang and his 3rd army colleagues reportedly have worked to strengthen alliances with local government-appointed leaders (Kamnan). As the lowest level of officials under the Ministry of Interior, this group provides a counterbalance to the local elected officials in the Tambon Administration Organizations (TAO), who are mostly linked with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party.

4. (SBU) Saprang also met this week with over 1,000 TAO heads as well as directors and presidents of educational institutions from the north. Using a tone softer than that of his address to heads of government agencies last Friday (ref b), Saprang gave as causes of the coup the need to counter lese majeste, the bad conduct of the caretaker government, and unprecedented national disunity.

5. (U) Claiming to have been misquoted in remarks about the 7-8 months of planning that preceded the coup, Saprang said he was referring to the escalation of internal divisions in Thai society. During this period, he explained, many people had called for military intervention while the armed forces had exercised restraint.

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